



THE EFFECT OF ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS ON COLLEGIATE ATHLETES' LIVES WITH SPECIAL ATTENTION TO GENDER DIFFERENCES

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Abstract:

Romantic partners are an important entourage for athletes. The purpose of the present study was to examine the difference in well-being and positive spillover effect between nationwide collegiate athletes with and without romantic partners. Furthermore, it is expected that the difference would depend on gender as well; hence, the quality of the relationship between an athlete and their romantic partner and its effects were examined with respect to gender. An internet survey was conducted for 205 collegiate athletes (mean age = 19.78, SD = 1.03) via registered monitors at Japanese social research companies. The chi-square test showed that the effect of the presence or absence of romantic partner did not differ according to gender ($p = 0.074$). The ANOVAs revealed that the romantic partner \times gender interaction had an effect on positive spillover between athletic life and life outside sports ($p = .047$). According to sub effect tests, positive spillover was higher in male athletes having romantic partners than those who did not ($p = .001$). The result of correlational analyses among those having romantic partners showed that for males, satisfaction with a romantic partner was related to interdependent happiness ($p = .004$) and positive spillover ($p = .002$). For females, satisfaction with a romantic partner was related to subjective happiness ($p = .001$) and interdependent happiness ($p = .001$). Thus, the present study identified that irrespective of gender, athletes having romantic partners had better well-being and spillover effect than who did not, proving the importance of romantic partners in collegiate athletes' lives.

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1. Introduction

One of various factors related to athletic life is human relationships, as it affects their performance and overall well-being (Jowett & Cramer, 2009). However, extremely talented and successful athletes do not have the time to go out with friends or initiate romantic relationships because of their constant training and competitions (Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015), although Gatzke, Barry, Papadakis, & Grover (2015) reported that the quality of friendship predicted the self-esteem of female collegiate athletes.

Romantic partners are an important entourage for athletes, and such relationships are crucial for their psychological well-being (Holder, Love, & Timoney, 2014). In spite of media interest in the romantic relationships of athletes (spouse, fiancée, girlfriend, boyfriend), academic research is scarce in this area (Jowett & Cramer, 2009). For collegiate students, romantic relationships are significantly associated with class absenteeism, but not with their grade point average (Schmidt & Lockwood, 2015). Therefore, it has been suggested that romantic partners are important for realizing a good *"balance between sports and life outside it (Arai, 2013)"*.

Jowett & Cramer (2009) investigated the spillover effect of athletes' romantic relationships on their performance. It was found that negative experiences with romantic partners were significantly related to athletes' satisfaction and depression. Campbell, Hosseini, Myers, & Calub (2016) examined the relationship between love and athletic performance among Olympic athletes in Europe and the United States. Most athletes reported that their performance was better when they were romantically involved with someone.

Although such researches have been conducted, empirical research is required to confirm the role of romantic or marital relationships in athletes' performance and wellbeing (Jowett & Cramer, 2009). Particularly, there is a lack of research into the effects of the presence/absence of a romantic relationship and the satisfaction of such a relationship on athletes' lives. Additionally, Jowett, & Cramer (2009) investigated the spillover effect between athletic sport life and romantic life; however, the influence of romantic partners on the spillover effect was not confirmed.

The purpose of the present study was to examine the differences in well-being and positive spillover effect between nationwide collegiate athletes with and without romantic partners. Moreover, it is expected that the difference would depend on gender as well; hence, the quality of the relationship between an athlete and their romantic

partner and its effects were examined with respect to gender (gender as a moderating variable).

2. Material and Methods

2.1 Participants

First year students (from a two-year program) and first to third year students (from a four/six-year program) participated in the study. The following criteria had to be met by the participants: (1) students belonging to colleges or universities; (2) athletes in competitive sports belonging to athletic clubs (excluding recreational clubs and club staff); and (3) students below twenty six years of age. The data set of the present study formed part of a larger project, the Research Project for Sport-Life Balance 2014 of Hosei University, which has already been published elsewhere (Arai, Suzuki, & Akiba, 2016).

2.2 Measures

i. Demographic data

The following demographic data were collected: gender, age, position in the team (regular, semi-regular, or non-regular), and hours of practice (i.e., the number of total hours of practice and the number of hours of individual practice (not including team practice) per week).

ii. Presence of romantic partner

In response to the question “Do you have a romantic partner? (i.e., boyfriend, girlfriend),” participants chose one option out of (1) currently have a partner, (2) never had a partner, or (3) had a partner before, but not now.

iii. Satisfaction with the romantic partner

The participants with a romantic partner were asked to rate their satisfaction with the relationship on a romantic partner satisfaction scale (Kanemasa & Daibo, 2003), which was partially modified for the present study. The scale comprised of two items: one was “Currently, how satisfied are you with the relationship with your partner?”, and the other was “Do you think that your partner meets your current requirements?” Both items were rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) absolutely not satisfied / absolutely do not agree to (7) strongly satisfied / strongly agree.

iv. Subjective happiness

The subjective happiness of participants was assessed based on one item that was present in a national survey conducted by the Cabinet Office, Government of Japan (2012), using an eleven-point scale from (0) strongly unhappy to (10) strongly happy.

v. Interdependent happiness

The participants also completed an Interdependent Happiness Scale (Hitokoto & Uchida, 2014) that assessed the happiness of individuals who are relationally oriented, quiescent, and ordinary. This scale composed of nine items on a five-point scale from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The total score of the nine items was taken as the overall interdependent happiness score (Alpha coefficient was .89).

vi. Positive spillover between athletic life and life outside sports

According to Fukumaru (2003), six items on a five-point scale ranging from (1) disagree to (1) agree were designed to assess the positive spillover between athletic life and life outside sports (Alpha coefficient was .87). In the present study, positive spillover was defined as the positive influence that athletic life and life outside sports had on each other.

2.3 Procedure

To collect data from a wide sample range, an internet survey was conducted via registered monitors at a Japanese social research company (Macromill Inc., Japan) that had approximately 2.11 million voluntarily registered people at the time of the study. The participants engaged in the online survey after consenting (by pushing the accept button) to the information and conditions regarding the present study. The explanation included an outline of the research, the discretion involved in participation, the publication possibility of this study, the potential benefits from this study, and the protection of participants' privacy. Subsequently, on completing the survey, they received about 90 points (one point to one Japanese yen) as a reward for participation. This study was implemented with approval from the ethics committee of Hosei University.

2.4 Statistical analyses

All analyses were conducted using the IBM SPSS Version 24 package. It was set at $p < .05$ for statistical significance level. A chi-square test was conducted to investigate whether gender moderated the effect of romantic relationships on collegiate athletes. Subsequently, a two way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted with

presence/absence of romantic partner and gender as independent variables and subjective happiness, interdependent happiness, positive spillover between athletic life and life outside sports, the number of total hours of practice, and the number of hours of individual practice as dependent variables. Moreover, correlation analysis was performed among participants (of each gender) with romantic partners.

3. Results

i. Demographic data and athletes having / not having romantic partners

A total of 205 participants (mean age = 19.78, SD = 1.03) comprising 86 male and 119 female collegiate athletes took part in the study. Of them, there were 106 regular, 45 semi-regular, and 54 non-regular players. The number of total hours of practice per week was 13.06 (SD = 13.85) hours, while the number of hours of individual practice per week was 5.99 (SD = 12.86) hours. There were 79 athletes with a romantic partner, 126 athletes without one including 86 who had never had a partner before and 40 who had had a partner before, but not now. The chi-square test showed that the presence or absence of romantic partner did not have varying effects according to gender [$\chi^2(1) = 3.19, p = 0.074$] (Table 1).

ii. Comparison of athletes having / not having romantic partners and gender

The ANOVAs (Table 2) showed that there was a main effect of having a romantic partner on subjective happiness [$F(1, 201) = 5.55, p = .02$], interdependent happiness [$F(1, 201) = 14.52, p < .001$], positive spillover between athletic life and life outside sports [$F(1, 201) = 9.57, p = .002$], the number of total hours of practice per week [$F(1, 201) = 5.14, p = .02$], and the number of hours of individual practice per week [$F(1, 201) = 5.04, p = .03$]. On the other hand, there was also a main effect of gender on the number of hours of individual practice per week [$F(1, 201) = 7.89, p = .01$]. Furthermore, a significant romantic partner \times gender interaction was found on positive spillover between athletic life and life outside sports [$F(1, 201) = 3.98, p = .047$]. According to sub effect tests, positive spillover was higher for male athletes having romantic partners than those who did not ($p = .001$).

iii. Relationships between satisfaction with a romantic partner and other variables among athletes having romantic partners

As Table 3 shows, satisfaction with a romantic partner was related to interdependent happiness ($r = .54, p = .004$) and positive spillover ($r = .57, p = .002$) among male participants having romantic partners. For females, satisfaction with a romantic partner

was related to subjective happiness ($r = .43$, $p = .001$) and interdependent happiness ($r = .33$, $p = .02$). For both genders, satisfaction with a romantic partner was not related to the number of hours of practice ($r_s = -.14 - .24$, n.s.).

3. Discussion

The present study revealed three important observations. The first is that irrespective of gender, athletes having romantic partners have better well-being and spillover effect compared to those who do not. Oishi, Krochik, & Akimoto (2010) mentioned that the presence of friends and partners who understood one another led to higher levels of happiness. The results of this study confirmed this finding. In Japan, Hasegawa, Tsuchiya, & Hino (1996) showed that burnout did not vary based on whether or not collegiate athletes had a romantic partner. Burnout is a marker of psychological ill-being (DeFreese & Smith, 2013), and a negative correlation was found between burnout and psychological well-being (Schaufeli, Bakker, Van der Heijden, & Prins, 2009). According to previous researches, it was considered that well-being did not depend on the presence/absence of a romantic partner; however, a different result was observed among collegiate athletes.

The second important finding of this study is that romantic relationships encourage positive spillover between athletic life and life outside sports for male athletes. Hasegawa, Tsuchiya, & Hino (1996) suggested that a favorable attitude toward heterosexual relations was positively related to supportive factors (i.e., enthusiasm to practice) and negatively related to unfavorable factors (i.e., burnout). Combined with the findings of the present study, the positive spillover is confirmed, indicating its significance among collegiate male athletes.

The third important finding of this study is the difference in correlational factor of satisfaction with a romantic partner, which varies depending on the gender. For both genders, satisfaction with a romantic partner was related to interdependent happiness. However, it was additionally related to subjective happiness among females. On the other hand, for males, satisfaction with a romantic partner was related to positive spillover effect between athletic sport life and life outside sports. Since satisfaction was important for the subjective happiness among female athletes, it is necessary to examine how female athletes build good relationships with their romantic partners. For male athletes, satisfaction might improve the connection between athletic life and life outside sports.

Two possible explanations are present for the significant relationship between satisfaction with a romantic partner and interdependent happiness. One is that

interdependent happiness is an indicator of the satisfaction with a romantic partner. The other is that the satisfaction with a romantic partner is enhanced by other forms of social support. A previous study suggested that romantic partners are comparable to friendships during the adolescent and early adulthood period (Flynn, Felmlee, & Conger, 2014). Considering the ANOVAs, having a partner in any form is related to subjective happiness among males. In the adolescent period, it is important to take notice of the importance of gender, culture, and the influence of romantic relationships on psychological well-being (Soller, 2014). Kuperberg & Padgett (2016) emphasized the cultural norms of romantic relationships through an online survey among college students. As Soller (2014) pointed out, a comprehensive understanding of early romance is necessary to grasp the important findings.

Conceivably, the grasping of "happiness" would be different depending on gender. For both genders, it is interesting that satisfaction with a romantic partner was not either positively or negatively related to the number of hours of practice. As mentioned above, it is suggested in the study that it is important to consider gender differences in the romantic relationships among collegiate athletes.

4. Recommendations

This survey has several limitations. First, because it was carried out for the purpose of executing a nationwide actual condition survey, the study collected data by means of an online survey. Second, there were few male athletes with a romantic partner ($n = 27$) in this study. Third, although this study only investigated the positive spillover effect between athletic life and life outside sports, no negative spillover effect was identified. Nonetheless, important findings were also derived from the study on the effect of romantic relationships of collegiate athletes on the balance between sports and their life outside it, which has practical implications.

5. Conclusion

The present study identified that irrespective of gender, collegiate athletes with romantic partners had better well-being and spillover effects than those who did not. Romantic partners encouraged positive spillover effect between athletic life and life outside sports among male collegiate athletes. The correlational factor of satisfaction with a romantic partner had different effects based on gender. The results of the study thus conclude that romantic relationships have significance in collegiate athletes' lives.

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Hirokazu Arai, Ph.D is an associate professor at the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Letters, Hosei University, Japan. He is a certified senior mental training consultant in sports; especially good at cognitive behavior therapy and team building approach. His research mainly focuses on (i) Sport-life balance and dual career, (ii) Value clarification, (iii) Sports-personship, and (iv) Inseparable pen and sword among university athletes.

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Appendix

Table 1: χ^2 test for presence or absence of romantic partner and gender

			Romantic partner		Total
			Not Having (N=126)	Having (N=79)	
Gender	Male	Number	59	27	86
			68.60%	31.40%	
		Adjusted residuals	1.8	-1.8	
	Female	number	67	52	119
			56.30%	43.70%	
		Adjusted residuals	-1.8	1.8	

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Table 2: ANOVA for comparison of athletes with or without romantic partner and gender

Romantic partner	Not having				Having				Main effect						Romantic partner × gender			
Gender	Male (N=59)		Female (N=67)		Male (N=27)		Female (N=52)		Romantic partner			Gender						
	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD	mean	SD	F	p	η ²	F	p	η ²	F	p	η ²	sub effect tests
Subjective happiness	6.49	2.53	6.91	1.60	7.26	2.18	7.54	1.64	5.55	.02	.03	1.39	.24	.01	0.06	.81	<.001	
Interdependent happiness	28.32	7.08	28.37	6.04	33.00	6.61	31.00	6.15	###	<.001	.07	1.03	.31	.01	1.14	.29	.01	
Positive spillover between athletic life and life outside of sport	20.32	5.31	21.64	4.80	23.85	3.41	22.40	4.29	9.57	.002	.05	0.01	.93	<.001	3.98	.047	.02	male not having < male having (p=.001)
The number of total hours of practice	12.54	9.77	10.82	7.88	19.30	31.04	13.29	7.74	5.14	.02	.03	3.61	.06	.02	1.11	.29	.01	
The number of hours of individual practice	5.90	6.60	3.96	5.36	13.41	31.27	4.85	6.34	5.04	.03	.02	7.89	.01	.04	3.13	.08	.02	

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Table 3: Correlational coefficient between satisfaction with a romantic partner and other variables among athletes having romantic partner

Male (N=27)	Subjective happiness	Interdependent happiness	Positive spillover between athletic life and life outside of sport	Number of total hours of practice	Number of hours of individual practice
Satisfaction with a romantic partner	0.01	0.54	0.57	0.18	0.24
<i>p</i>	.98	.004	.002	.37	.23
Female (N=52)	Subjective happiness	Interdependent happiness	Positive spillover between athletic life and life outside of sport	Number of total hours of practice	Number of hours of individual practice
Satisfaction with a romantic partner	0.43	0.33	0.15	-0.14	-0.07
<i>p</i>	.001	.02	.29	.32	.60

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